

Shorter Articles

Field Appraisal of Manuscript Collections

by R.J. TAYLOR

Determining the monetary value of manuscript items or collections offered to an archival repository is a complex problem which requires considerable analysis and skill. Since manuscript material is by its nature unique, and because usually no price list exists to provide a standard of comparison in the determination of value, an appraisal must be based upon the identification of components within the item or collection which can be judged in monetary terms. These appraisals may occur either at the repository or in the field.

Field appraisals should be avoided whenever possible because they generally place the archivists concerned at a disadvantage. Not only must the archivist perform the appraisal without immediate access to the range of reference material available in the repository, but also field appraisals must often be conducted under the pressure of time in a difficult physical environment, and perhaps under the watchful eye of the vendor or his representative. As a matter of routine, therefore, it should be suggested that collections be sent to the repository for appraisal. However, it may be impractical, for example, to transfer an extremely large collection of records of an organization or business for appraisal at the repository, especially if it is likely that only part of the unit will have archival value. Field appraisals may be required for exceptionally valuable collections which the vendor is reluctant to allow out of his custody prior to sale, and will be necessary when auction offerings are previewed. In such instances, the archival repository must expect to assume the cost of a field appraisal if it has decided that the collection in question is of potential interest.

An appropriate methodology is necessary for the effective appraisal of collections in the field, the objective of which is to accumulate adequate notes on the material to assist in determining a monetary value at the repository. First, it should be pointed out that the thoroughness with which a collection can be examined in the field is determined by such factors as the time available, the extent and state of the collection, and the knowledge and experience of those conducting the appraisal. Careful research into the history of the originator of the collection will assist in the rapid and accurate identification of significant individuals and events documented in the collection. Research should also extend to a consideration of the contents of similar collections already preserved in repositories. After such preparation, it should be possible to approach the appraisal with an idea of what one might expect to find in the collection. This expectation is useful in establishing a framework for the examination, provided that the flexibility to accept the unexpected is not sacrificed. For example, it is reasonable to expect that the collection of a novelist would include a manuscript series, and the person conducting the appraisal should be sufficiently familiar with the novelist's work to identify the manuscripts which have been published. But what can never be anticipated before examining a specific collection is the relationship in extent and significance which exists between the various series in the collection. Regardless of how precisely categories or groupings of like collections are defined, it remains impossible to create a model of a typical collection beyond the suggestion of probable series.

The examination of a collection should proceed from the general to the specific as time allows. A cursory first survey of the collection is adequate for the calculation of approximate extent and limiting dates. These initial figures will almost certainly change during the course of the examination, but the important information that they record remains the basic level of control over the collection. Most of the subsequent information and impressions gathered from the examination will be based upon a refinement of these first physical and chronological measurements. The preliminary survey is also a good opportunity to gain impressions about the physical condition of the collection.

An attempt to identify the series or types of material contained in the collection is the next step, followed by a determination of the extent and limiting dates of each series. This analysis at the series level is often difficult in the field since the existing order of the collection must be respected. It may be necessary to work with physical containers rather than with series in the hope that like material may be brought together subsequently into series on paper. In any case, it is important always to note the physical container and its location so that the complete collection can be assembled should it be acquired. By the time that the series are identified, it should be determined whether the originator has created lists or indexes which might assist in the location of material within the collection. Such finding aids contribute to the

value of the collection, provided that the finding aid material is included in the sale. The examination of the collection should use whatever finding aids are available. This should accelerate the examination while checking the accuracy and usefulness of the finding aids.

Notes for the appraisal will now likely resemble the following:

John Doe Papers c. 18' c. 1914-1970

Brown cardboard box (closet) 1'

Mss. n.d., 8"

corr. n.d., 1943-1947, 2"

clippings (loose) n.d. 1942-1947, 1956, 2"

If material is preserved in files which have been titled, a list of such titles would follow after the identification of series. Ideally the limiting dates and the extent, expressed in pages, inches or centimetres, should be recorded with each file title. Such precision, however, may not be feasible within the time available except for certain files which are analyzed in detail. Given the general extent and limiting dates of a series or container (a filing cabinet is usually 27 inches deep), a file title list alone is sufficient if exceptionally large or small files are noted. Even if titled files do not exist, it is often possible to identify discrete units of loose material which may be easily titled for listing as file equivalents. At this stage of the examination, any conscious arrangement of the material by the originator within a series becomes evident. For example, the file titles indicate whether correspondence is arranged alphabetically by name, alphabetically by subject, or chronologically. The arrangement of material is of evidential value and contributes to the research potential of the collection.

Once a file list has been produced, the examination could proceed to a sampling of file contents. It is not a good idea to sample files randomly. Those files which relate to significant aspects of the originator's history should be examined first, as well as files which are unusual in any way. In sampling files within a correspondence series, the names of correspondents should be noted with the number and inclusive dates of letters by each correspondent. It is important to identify the correspondents and their relationship with the originator. In addition, an attempt must be made to evaluate the significance of the correspondence in the sampled files. Basic distinctions can be made, for example, by separating invitations and acknowledgments, business correspondence, personal correspondence and family correspondence in the collection of an individual. The extent to which correspondence can be considered reflective or introspective is a factor and a rating scale of perhaps one to five may be useful in indicating this aspect of groups of correspondence or files. Such a rating scale may also be useful in evaluating diaries. The correspondence should also be studied to determine whether it documents the sequential development of events or ideas of potential significance to any study of the participants. The

preservation of carbon copies or drafts of replies to letters received should be noted since their existence affects the comprehensive nature of the collection. Finally it should be noted whether the chronology of the correspondence is indicated through dates or sequential arrangement.

In sampling literary manuscripts, it is important to indicate whether the specific manuscript is a typescript/holograph original ("to." or "ho." is a useful abbreviation), or a typescript carbon copy ("tc.")). It is also important to indicate whether the manuscript is a variant ("var.") of a published text and whether there are textual annotations ("ann.") which reflect substantive changes. If the manuscript is a fragment ("frag.") this should be noted and, of course, the extent in pages, inches or centimeters is necessary. Finally, whenever possible, it should be determined whether the manuscript has been published. Thus, notes for the appraisal of a manuscript series might be:

The Archival Dream: novel pub., to. var. with ann. 298 pp.

The Archival Dream: tc. 257 p.

"Green Thumb": short story, to. ann. frag. 13 pp.

Clippings in either loose or scrapbook form should be sampled to determine how well they are organized and preserved, and to what extent they reflect upon the achievements of the originator. The dates and sources of clippings should be indicated. If there is a high content of duplication usually associated with a clipping service, this will affect the appraisal. The physical condition of the clippings is important since the preservation of newsprint material is potentially costly for a repository.

Throughout the examination of the collection there are general questions which should be kept in mind. One is the research potential of the collection. Is it likely that the collection will serve several research purposes or lend itself to inter-disciplinary use? For example, the papers of poet A.M. Klein document his political activities as a federal C.C.F. candidate, his commitment to Zionism, and his work as a publicist for a major Canadian business as well as the many facets of his literary career. Another general question is the completeness of the collection. Does the collection document the entire past history of the originator or is material missing which research or internal evidence indicates must have existed? An attempt should be made to determine whether such gaps were caused by destruction, previous disposition, or the withholding of material. The additional expenditures on the collection to meet the requirements of the repository or the expectations of the vendor after it has been acquired should be considered. The physical condition of the collection might suggest that conservation work will be necessary to ensure its permanent preservation. It should be determined whether all or a part of the collection will likely be microfilmed. A large collection which contains a significant percentage of duplicate material requires a consideration of either storage cost or the manpower cost of

selection. The cost of arrangement and description in the archival repository is another factor.

Since field appraisals normally occur in the natural habitat of the collection, be it office or home, it is rare that the vendor or his agent is not present for at least part of the appraisal. The presence of the vendor provides an opportunity to request information or identification which would facilitate the preparation of an accurate and just appraisal. Questions relating to the mechanics of the transaction should also be discussed with the vendor. While such a discussion could be conducted by letter, it is often possible to ascertain the vendor's expectations quickly at the time of the appraisal and to answer questions which he might have. Does the vendor require payment immediately, or will he prefer installments or payment at some later time, perhaps in the next calendar or fiscal year? Has the vendor considered donation for a tax credit if this is an option available at the repository? Should any question exist in the appraiser's mind concerning the vendor's title to the collection, this matter should be probed in discussions with the vendor. For example, the repository may be dealing with the child of the originator of the collection. It is important to know whether there are other children or parties who have legal rights which could influence the disposition of the collection. Such questions as access restrictions and copy expectations which might affect the monetary value of the collection should be considered. If possible, it would be useful to know if the vendor is negotiating with other repositories. When the originator is an existing organization or a living individual, the future acquisition of material could be discussed.

The specific monetary value of the collection should not be transmitted to the vendor during the field appraisal and, if asked for a value, the appraiser could explain that it is necessary to analyze carefully the findings of the examination before an offer would be possible. A reasonable time, however, should probably be established for the decision upon a definite offer. This position protects the appraiser from making a premature commitment based upon an inadequate and pressured judgement of the material just examined, and it may benefit the vendor by ensuring a fuller appreciation of the collection. If the field appraisal has been conducted efficiently and with professional assurance, the appraiser will leave the collection confident that it will be possible to determine and justify an offer which reflects its monetary value.